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ABSTRACT

Evaluations by school district research and evaluation units have minimal impact, because they do not meet the realities of school district decision making. School districts are loosely coupled systems that do not respond to centralized planning or evaluations, particularly if findings are unfavorable. To maximize utilization of their findings, district evaluation units should put less emphasis on producing reports for district-wide consumption. Instead they should stress working with small units--school buildings, teachers, and project directors--to design, implement, and report evaluations, following Patton's active-reactive-adoptive model. Other ways to improve the use of evaluation reports include: (1) arranging a conference for evaluators, clients, and external funders; (2) conducting independent evaluations of each report in order to eliminate those which serve no useful purpose; and (3) routing funds from external projects directly to local managers, rather than to the district unit. In conclusion, district units, external funding agencies, school administrators, and those who train evaluators all share the responsibility for non-utilization. (CP)

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SCHOOL DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR IMPACT ON EVALUATION OFFICES

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Introduction

As many of you are aware, a sharp and much needed critique of educational evaluation is presently underway. My remarks today are intended to contribute to one important part of that examination, i.e., the extent to which educational decision-makers utilize evaluations.

I have three purposes:

1) To review some main theses of a current "school of thought" in organizational decision-making.

2) To point out the implications these theses have for school district evaluation office activities, and the utilization of their reports.

3) To explore ways in which school district evaluation offices might be organized or operated so as to maximize their impact on educational decision-making.

I enter this conversation as an outsider. I am not an evaluation specialist; my training, experience, and research has been in school administration, with one of my interests being the examination of schools as complex social systems. I became involved in this issue of evaluation utilization by an indirect route. My first exposure to the issue occurred when I participated in a RAND Corporation study of the change process in urban school districts.[1] In that study, I kept encountering school district evaluation units that differed markedly in their organization, structure, and functioning. I was constantly puzzled when trying to determine whether these organizations' evaluations made much

of a difference in the change process. In some few instances, they seemed to have an impact; usually they did not. Subsequently, I was appointed to a State Title IV Advisory Committee. As you know, all Title IV developmental and adoptable projects must be evaluated, and suddenly I found myself a consumer of a large number of evaluations both at the local project and the state-wide level. My utilization puzzlement deepened. While some of the evaluations had an impact at the local level, others did not; the state-wide reports, which often consisted of aggregations of local level reports, had very little impact on the State Advisory Committee's decisions.[2]

Subsequently, Catherine Lyon asked me to join her in conducting some field studies of school district research and evaluation offices. I was pleased to participate in these studies because I felt this activity would provide me with a first-hand opportunity to look at the functioning of school district evaluation units and perhaps to clarify some of my evaluation puzzlement.

The following comments are based on what we observed in these field sites and in work in other school districts. Many of the ideas in the paper flow from conversations that Catherine Lyon, Pam McGranahan and I held during and after the field site visits.

Before proceeding further, let me both narrow and broaden the focus of this presentation. By narrowing the focus, I mean that I am talking only about the evaluation activities of school district research and evaluation offices. Some school district offices are responsible for activities in addition to their educational evaluation tasks, e.g., research and development. It is not uncommon, for example, for district evaluation offices to conduct administrative research, e.g., studies

of pupil enrollment trends, school building utilization studies, financial studies, and school busing projections. I do not consider these evaluations, but an extension of the administrative research tradition which has been in the school districts for decades. Indeed, in some of the districts, the "old" administrative research office has been combined with the "new" office of evaluation into the Research and Evaluation Office. While district offices are often referred to as Research and Evaluation Offices or Research Development and Evaluation Offices, I will, for purposes of this presentation, refer to these as district evaluation units as a reminder that I am only discussing their evaluation functions.[3] Also, I am talking about evaluations conducted by school district offices, not those conducted by private evaluation firms or individuals.

By broadening the topic, I mean that the characteristics of school districts I will identify as being important when organizing and operating a district evaluation unit do not uniquely affect evaluation, but must be considered by anyone who expects to have impact on the functioning of schools.

Now let me turn to the main thesis of my argument and, as a way of demonstrating its general applicability, use a non-evaluation example to illustrate the point. My central thesis that the differentiated levels of evaluation utilization by school district decision-makers can be partially explained by examining the organization and functioning of school districts as complex organizations. School district utilization of the evaluation unit's products is related to the degree that the district evaluation unit's activities and reports are consonant with the realities of the organizational life of school bureaucracies. A non-evaluation example will illustrate the point.

I am associated with the Study of Schooling that is now being conducted under John Goodlad's leadership.[4] This study is a large, in-depth, multi-perspective look at what really goes on in schools.

We asked classroom teachers the following question: "How much influence does each of the following have on what you teach in this subject?" We presented the teachers with a number of possible choices, including: district curriculum guides, district consultants, commercially prepared materials, state curriculum guides, the teacher's own background, the teacher's interests and experiences, and other teachers' opinions. The teachers were asked to respond to each item by indicating whether, in making instructional decisions, they utilized the sources "a lot, some, little, not at all." Our preliminary data analysis indicates generally that district and state curriculum guides seldom have any influence on teacher instructional decision-making.[5] This finding is tentative, but it seems to be consistent with findings in other studies of teacher behavior.[6] State or school district curriculum guides generally do not drive teacher instructional decisions. Yet to my knowledge, all state departments of education, and a very large percentage of school districts, have invested considerable resources in curriculum departments that produce curriculum guides replete with suggested texts, reading lists, films, classroom activities, and the like.

Why are these splendid documents largely ignored? Is it because the preparers are incompetent? Is it because the materials are incomplete or out of date? I doubt it! Our thesis is that these reports are under-utilized because the reports are developed in central school district or state locations for local classroom utilization. Activities

that are organized in that manner and for that purpose are based on a faulty understanding about how school principals and teachers make decisions. For the most part, schools in America do not respond to centralized technical services no matter how well intentioned or carefully designed. As a result, centrally developed instructional materials and guides simply do not penetrate to the classroom level.

We believe it follows that central district evaluation units that develop reports on a district-wide basis, however well intentioned or carefully designed, will not influence school site or classroom practice very much. Evaluations targeted at the school site or classroom or specific project level will likely have the greatest impact on schooling practice.

Let me now turn to school district decision-making processes that make school site and classroom penetration so difficult. I will draw out the implication these processes have for the design and operation of district evaluation units. Finally, I will conclude with some recommended ways in which district evaluation units might become more responsive to the organizational realities of school bureaucracies.

Decision-Making Processes in School Districts

Not everyone agrees on how school districts operate and make decisions. Some view it as essentially a rational, technical system that presently makes poor decisions because it lacks sufficient reliable hard data upon which to make more enlightened decisions. Individuals with this perspective would upgrade the quality of decision-making by improving the district's capacity to acquire reliable hard data. They would view the provision of such data to top decision-makers as a major responsibility of district evaluation units. The leaders of district evaluation

units who hold this view would invest a substantial amount of the district's evaluation resources in developing evaluations that would give district officials data which would be utilized in making decisions about improving the operation of the district office, school sites, classrooms, and special projects. Many of the evaluation unit directors we visited appeared to embrace this "rational-empirical" view of school district decision-making and the evaluation unit's role in upgrading the quality of decision-making at the central level.[7]

However, not everyone agrees with this diagnosis of why school districts make poor decisions nor with this prognosis of the effect more "hard data" will have on improving school practices. Another school of thought, and one I find to be a more accurate picture of reality, holds that school districts are not very technically oriented, but are instead loosely organized and generally not responsive to centralized, technical approaches to improving the quality of decision-making, especially as it impacts on the local project or classroom level.

This view is clearly articulated by Karl Weick when he applies the concept "loosely coupled systems" in describing how school districts operate.[8] The term "loosely coupled system" conveys the image of organizations in which "coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness."[9] Such an organization can be expected to be unresponsive to centralized planning or decision-making. In Weick's words:

> Unfortunately, organizations continue to think that planning is a good thing, they spend much time on planning, and actions are assured in terms of their fit with plans. Given a potential loose coupling between

> the intentions and actions of members, it should come as no surprise that administrators are baffled and angered when things never happen the way they were supposed to.[10]

I think Weick's explanation of the lack of responsiveness of "loosely coupled systems" to planning efforts can also be used to explain teachers' and principals' lack of responsiveness to centralized evaluation efforts directed to top-level administrators.

Meyer takes a similar position.[11] In describing school districts, he uses an institutional model based on two main ideas:

> First, school organizational structures reflect environmental institutional rules of education. Second, these organizational structures are decoupled from the technical work of education, and many of its vagaries and problems. In maintaining the socially standardized categories of the educational system . . . the schools delegate the technical work and uncertainty of education beyond the purview of the organizational structures.[12]

Essentially, Meyer's argument is that school systems "develop few policies in the areas of greatest significance for their central goals and purposes."[13]

He states further that:

> Classrooms are sufficiently decoupled from school and district formal structures that a good deal of innovation is possible, but it is unlikely to be structured by the school or district organization.[14]

He concludes:

> There is certainly no reason to believe that some process which brought the whole enterprise under mechanistic organizational control--even if the mechanisms involved were effective ones--would in the long run be beneficial.[15]

March[16] adds still another dimension to our picture of school system decision-making when he reminds us that school organizations generally do not need or want technical clarity on how well they are performing their primary functions. If they agree to have such assessments developed:

> Managers always look for ways of scoring well; auditors look for ways of prohibiting those ways by which managers score well without doing well. The control game is one that is familar to teachers and students, tax agencies and tax payers, regulators and the regulated.[17]

In summary, the "school of thought" represented by Weick, Meyer, and March views school systems as organizations that are largely "loosely coupled," that strive to conform to institutionally and culturally defined expectations rather than to technical excellence, and that can avoid or ignore unfavorable technical reports when they want to. It follows, I believe, that school districts can be characterized as organizations that do not seek technical evaluations, and teachers and administrators can, and often do, ignore unfavorable evaluations that are produced.

Now, let me relate this view of school systems to the organization and functioning of school district evaluation units and to the concerns that have been expressed about educational decision-makers' non-utilization of educational evaluations. I will refer primarily to the work of Michael Patton.[18]

If this "loosely coupled" characterization of school systems is accurate, it would seem that district evaluation units that want to maximize the utilization of their work should shift much of their activities away from producing reports for district-wide consumption and

redirect their energies toward working with small units, e.g., school buildings, teachers, teacher groups, or special project directors. Decision-makers at the lowest or smallest unit level should be given aid in identifying and solving their problems on their terms. It is at this level that the district evaluation unit will likely have its greatest impact.

School districts that want to undertake such a shift might well design their activities around the "active-reactive-adoptive" evaluation model Patton advocates. Such district evaluation units would take seriously his recommendations that evaluators work closely with project directors and staff in designing, implementing, and writing up evaluations. They would consciously seek those individuals or groups which have a personal interest in the evaluation and then design the evaluation to meet the individual's or group's expressed decision-making requirements.

It is difficult, of course, to make any generalizations on the degree to which district evaluation units are operating or are attempting to operate as is suggested here. Many of the districts we observed were, in my opinion, operating far too often on a centralized, district-wide mode. They used as their performance standard the degree to which their reports measured up to the dictates of good evaluation research methodology. The supposed beneficiaries of their reports often responded negatively to inquiries about the impact the district evaluation units have had on the district's instructional or schooling processes.

We have seen district evaluation units that are attempting to change the focus of their evaluation efforts so that they respond to the management needs of individuals and specific projects rather than to

some unspecified general audience. While their activities have fallen short of their intended goal, they are moving in a direction that is consistent with realitites of school district decision-making, as we have described them.

Implications for District Evaluation Units

This proposed refocusing would have organizational complications for district evaluation units. For example, it might require a reorganization of the office staff into field teams, each team having specific client groups to which it would have to be responsive. The budget may have to be changed from a "line-item" to a "program budget" format. There are likely many ways of reorganizing offices to achieve this new focus, and the appropriateness of various approaches would depend on the special circumstances in each district.

Our survey data indicates that most district evaluation directors do not see reorganization as a means of improving their unit's performance. When asked what they thought would increase the effectiveness of their evaluation units, the two items that received the greatest positive response were additional staff members and increased access to computer time and programs. Internal evaluation unit reorganization received neither ranking nor checking by 79% of the respondents.[19]

I would argue that the reverse should be the case if district evaluation offices want to increase significantly their impact on school district operations. More personnel and computer time will simply result in district evaluation units doing more of the same.

Let me end with some proposals about how districts might go about reorienting the focus and activities of their district's evaluation units:

1. I propose that school district evaluation unit staffs, potential district utilizers and external funding organizations, e.g., federal and state governmental agencies, be brought together to develop a clearer understanding of the essential characteristics of school districts as decision-making organizations and to assess ways in which evaluation units can contribute most productively to the improvement of the district's educational program. School districts need a clear picture of how much freedom they have in designing and conducting evaluations.

2. I propose that districts consider adopting a "sunset law" on all evaluation reports. That is, at regular intervals the supposed beneficiaries of each evaluation report should be gathered together by some independent group and asked to indicate whether or not they have utilized the evaluation report and to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the report. If any report cannot "pass muster," then the district evaluation unit would either be required to develop a different design that would be agreed to by the local decision-maker or the unit would not be allowed to continue producing that report. My hunch is that this "evaluation of evaluations" would eliminate a large number of district-wide annual reports that serve no useful purpose. This would free up funds and staff which could be used to develop evaluations with greater utilization potential.

3. Because we are in California, perhaps it is timely to propose an educational evaluation voucher plan. Under this scheme, evaluation funds that accompany externally funded projects would go directly to the local project managers rather than to the district's central administration or evaluation unit. The project managers could then purchase evaluation services from the district evaluation offices; however, the

design of the evaluations unit's proposed study would have to meet local needs. If the local manager could not get the district evaluation unit to conduct the kind of evaluation he or she would find most useful, and it were determined that the request was reasonable, then the evaluation unit would be judged "non-responsive" and the project director could go outside the district school system for evaluation help.

I realize that these recommendations are much easier said than done. Some districts that might otherwise be responsive to such suggestions face formidable obstacles in the form of entrenched bureaucracies, complex union contracts, long-term commitments to present arrangements, etc. Not all districts have this problem, however. Some districts could accomplish such a change in direction and focus with minimal disruption, while others would have to go through some rather impressive organizational gymnastics.

In summary, let me repeat the main theme of this paper. I have suggested that utilization of educational evaluations that are completed by school district evaluation units will be increased when such units design their activities so that they are consonant with the realities of school district decision-making practices. School districts were described as loosely coupled systems that do not respond to centralized planning or evaluations and that can avoid, ignore, or fail to utilize centralized planning or evaluations that do not meet the organization's needs.

I suggested ways that district evaluation units and school district managers might enhance the likelihood that the products of district evaluation units would be utilized. These suggestions included: following the active-reactive-adoptive model suggested by Michael Patton;

providing for a greater exchange of perceptions of problems by evaluators, clients, and external funders; an evaluation "sunset law"; and an evaluation "voucher plan." I recognize that the task of redirecting emphasis and focus would be easier for some than for others.

Let me conclude by acknowledging that the responsibility for non-utilization must be shared by many. One of the realities district evaluators must contend with is the expectations of external funding agencies. These agencies oftentimes demand reports based on aggregate test scores as a means of measuring the effectiveness of a program. One can only hope that the considerable research and thinking about how to improve evaluation utilization will not be lost on these agencies.

Still another problem is the lack of knowledge and sophistication school administrators have about the strengths and weaknesses of educational evaluation. Some view evaluation as something to be feared, while others hear their decision-making salvation in the quiet hum of computers. Evaluation, of course, is neither of these. As a representative of those who train school administrators, I wish to acknowledge the responsibility we share in training future school administrators who will be enlightened regarding the usefulness of evaluation as a management tool. On the other hand, those who train evaluators have an obligation to assure that future evaluators have a realistic view of the characteristics of school districts so that their evaluations will be designed and conducted in a way that will maximize their ultimate utilization.

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Footnotes

[1]Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. An exploratory study of school district adaptation. R-2010-HEW. Santa Monica, Calif.: The RAND Corporation, 1979.

[2]I am not alone in my concern. For an excellent review of the problems of statewide educational evaluation problems, see the California Educational Management and Evaluation Commission. The uses and limits of educational evaluation at the state level. Sacramento, Calif. December 1978. (Mimeo)

[3]My definition of evaluation is the one explicated by Patton, "The systematic collection of data about activities and outcomes of actual programs in order for interested persons to make judgments about specific aspects of what a program is doing or effecting." M. Patton. Utilization-focused evaluation. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1978.

[4]See Harold Shane interviews John I. Goodlad, A preview of Schooling in America. Phi Delta Kappan, September 1978, 47-50.

[5]Preliminary findings reported by Francis Klein, /I/D/E/A/ Research Division, March 8, 1979.

[6]See, Jackson, P. Life in classrooms. Holt, Rinehart, & Winston. Also see, Lortie, D. School teacher. University of Chicago Press, 1975.

[7]Chin, R., & Benne, K. General strategies for effective changes in human systems. In W. Bennis, K. Benny, & R. Chin, (Eds.), The planning of change. 2nd Ed. London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

[8]Weick, K. E. Educational organizations as loosely-coupled systems. Administrative Science Quarterly, 1976, 1-19.

[9]Ibid., p. 3.

[10]Ibid., p. 4.

[11]Meyer, J. W. Research on school and district organizations. Paper presented to the Sociology of Education Conference, San Diego, Calif., April 1977.

[12]Ibid., p. 7.

[13]Ibid., p. 16.

[14]Ibid., p. 19.

[15]Ibid., p. 20.

[16]March, J. G. American public school administration: A short analysis. School Review, February 1978, 217-250.

[17]Ibid., p. 241.

[18]Patton, M. Utilization-focused evaluation. Beverly Hills, Calif.: 1978

[19]Lyon, Catherine Dillon et al. Evaluation and school districts. Center for the Study of Evaluation, UCLA Graduate School of Education, 1978, 112, 114.

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